

The Nature of Initiatic Knowledge

Those who approach our disciplines must first of all realize this basic point: that the problem and even meaning of knowledge appear in a way very different from the various domains of modern culture.

From an initiatic point of view, *to know* does not mean “to think,” but *to be* the known object. Something is not really known until it is *realized*, or, in other words, until one’s consciousness is transformed into it.

In these terms, knowledge is one and the same with *experience*; thus, the initiatic method is a purely experimental method. As far as certainty is concerned, what counts here is what one has learned through direct and individual experience. In ordinary life, every sensation, every yearning, emotion, or direct perception (a pain, a desire, an intuition) has this character. To speak here of “true” and “false” is meaningless; what matters is the knowledge of the thing itself according to an absolute “Is,” or to an experienced “Is” that does not wait for intellectual recognition. In this type of knowledge, there are no degrees or approximations or probabilities; one either has it or hasn’t it.

However, for the ordinary man such knowledge is restricted to the sensible order, which has a finite, contingent, and accidental character. That which he ordinarily regards as knowledge is something different; it is a system of concepts, relations, and hypotheses that no longer has a pragmatic but rather an abstract character. The immediate data of experience, namely that which is directly evident to one’s consciousness, are usually regarded as mere “phenomena”; one tends to posit or assume the existence *behind* them of something to which one attributes the character of true and objective reality. For science, this “something” is matter, or the varied interplay of etheric vibrations; for the philosophers, it is the “noumenon” or the “thing in itself” or some other vague idea of theirs; for religion, it is some sort of divine hypostasis. Generally speaking, this is the situation: a body of knowledge is organized--- profane knowledge --- that does not go beyond purely sensible experience and which has a certain degree of objectivity only through transcending everything that has the value of individual and living evidence, vision, and meaning realized by consciousness. What emerges is an antithesis: what is pure experience, due to its finite and phenomenal character, is not “knowledge,” just as that which is regarded as “knowledge” is not experience.

The initiatic path goes beyond this antithesis, pointing to an essentially different direction in which the criterion of direct experience is never abandoned. While for ordinary people this experience is one and the same with sensible experience, the initiatic teaching claims the possibility of many forms of experience, of which the former is just one. Each of these forms corresponds to a given way of perceiving reality; they are susceptible to being transformed into one another and to arrange themselves in a hierarchial fashion, in levels of perception that have an increasingly higher degree of absoluteness. According to such perspectives, there is

no “world of phenomena” and an “absolute” behind them; what is “phenomenal” is merely that which characterizes a certain degree of experience and a certain state of the Self, while what is “absolute” is that which is correlative to another degree of experience and to another state of the Self, which the former may generate through an appropriate transformation. As far as the measure of absoluteness is concerned, one may say approximately that it is determined by the degree of *active identification*, namely by the degree according to which the Self is implicated and unified in its experience, and according to which its object is transparent to it in terms of a *meaning*. In correspondence to these degrees, the hierarchy proceeds from “sign” to “sign,” from “name” to “name,” until it reaches a state of perfect, superrational, intellectual vision, of full actualization or realization of the object of the Self and the Self in the object. That is a state both of power and of absolute evidence in regard to what is known; once this state is reached, every rationalization and speculation appears superfluous and every discussion meaningless. There is an ancient saying according to which one did not join the ancient Mysteries in order “to learn,” but rather in order to achieve a sacred state through a deep experience. (9)

As a consequence of this, the initiatic teaching considers more negatively than positively the tendency of the mind to wander in the interpretation and solution of this or that philosophical problem, to erect theories and to be interested in some or another view of profane science. All this is useless and leads nowhere. The real problem has only a *practical* and operative character. What are the means to obtain the transformation and integration of my experience? This is what one should be concerned about. This is why initiation in the West has been associated less with the concept of a cognitive process than with that of an Art (*Ars Regia*) or of a Work (*opus magnum*, or *opus magicum*), or of a symbolic construction (the construction of the “Temple”), while in China the notions of the Absolute and of a *way* converge in one term, “Tao.”

It is therefore evident that the more or less Theosophical spiritualism that today fills the heads of its devotees with all kinds of speculations and fantasies about cosmology and supersensible worlds and beings can only foster an attitude that is flawed from the start. Only the experiential and practical attitude of a restrained mind and a silent and secret action performed under the aegis of the golden Hermetic saying “post laborem scientia” (knowledge after work) is healthy and valid from an initiatic point of view. I dare say that this applies to everything else for which modern “educated” men claim superiority and the right to hold opinions on. Culture in the modern, profane sense does not constitute a necessary presupposition, nor a privileged condition for spiritual realization. Quite the contrary: a person who has remained outside the crossroads of culture, “psychology,” and the various aesthetic and literary contaminations, but who displays an open mind, balance, and courage is more qualified to receive a superior knowledge than any academic professor, writer, or “critical thinker” of our day and age. Therefore, those who *really* amount to something in the initiatic order can be recognized by their extreme reluctance to theorize and argue. If these people discern a sincere aspiration in you, they will tell you only this: “There is the problem, and these are the means: go ahead.”

Another consequence of the initiatic concept of knowledge is the principle of *differentiation*, which is also in distinct contrast with the ideas that inform modern profane knowledge. In fact, the entire modern “culture” (with science at the

forefront) is dominated by a democratic, leveling, and uniform tendency. This culture regards as an “acquisition” what is within everyone’s reach: thus, according to modern culture, a truth is such only when everyone can recognize it, provided they have reached a certain level of education or, at most, pursued some studies, which nevertheless leave them the same as they always were. This may be true in the case of something conceptual and abstract, to be put in someone’s head like something into a sack. But when it comes to experience, and more specifically to an experience conditioned by an essential transformation of the substance of consciousness, precise limits must arise. The knowledge acquired in this way cannot possibly be within everyone’s reach, nor can it be transmitted to everyone without thereby degrading and desecrating it. There are different sorts of knowledge, and their differentiation corresponds to that which initiation, in its various degrees, brings about in human nature. This knowledge cannot be truly understood or “realized” by any but those who are at the same level, or who have an equal degree in a hierarchy that is endowed with a rigorously objective and ontological character. Thus, even aside from those occult or Theosophical expositions that are mere divagations or fantasies, in regard to initiatic and effective esoteric knowledge, the uselessness of merely theoretical communication and propagation is again confirmed. To reduce initiatic knowledge to a “theory” is the worst thing one can do. Here more than ever it is *allusion* and *symbol* that serve to produce illuminations. But if, as a result, there is no *beginning of an inner movement*, even this has no value. The very character of initiatic knowledge demands differentiation. It is natural that those who regard ordinary existence and sensible experience as the beginning and end of everything lack any common ground with that which, in its essence, is *realization*. All this should be seen with perfect clarity, and also its natural consequence: either to give up or to recognize different criteria of truth and knowledge from those predominant in modern culture and thought. The way of initiation is one that establishes substantial differences among human beings and reaffirms the principle of *suum cuique* (to each his own) against the egalitarian and uniform view of knowledge: according to this principle, one’s knowledge, truth, and freedom are proportional to what one is.

One objection worth addressing may come from someone used to operating among tangible things and “concrete” ideas, who may say that transcendent states of being and the experiences mentioned (even if they can be achieved, since they are enclosed in the “subjective” sphere) merely amount to mysticism: that the criterion of knowledge as experience and identification is more or less one of mere feeling, and therefore it does not produce any insight when explaining, understanding, or giving an account of external things and of what takes place in us. These objections will be analyzed in greater depth further on. At this point, it is enough to clarify two points.

First, when we talk initiatically about “identification,” what we mean is always an *active* identification, not a confusing and merging with or sinking into something: it is not an infra-intellectual and emotive state, but a state of essential and superrational clarity. Here lies the difference between the mystical and the initiatic spheres; it is an essential difference, even though not immediately evident to those who, apart from things and abstract concepts, can see only a dark night in which, for them, all cats are black.

The second point concerns the very notion of “explaining,” although if we pursued this issue, it would lead us too far. We should begin by turning the tables against the objection and asserting that none of the profane disciplines has ever, nor ever will, provide any *real* explanation whatsoever. Those who, in order to “explain,” attempt to show that the contrary is inconceivable, must indicate how they can really “explain” something outside the abstract domain of mathematics and formal logic (in which “rational necessity” or the inconceivability of the contrary is reduced to mere coherence in regard to the propositions previously agreed upon). We intend to refer to concrete reality. However, here, from a rational point of view, there is absolutely nothing that exists simply because its opposite is inconceivable *a priori*. There is nothing in regard to which, beside various pseudo-explanations, one could not ask: “Why thus and not otherwise?”

Ancient and traditional science, to which initiatic knowledge is related, has followed an essentially different path, namely the path of knowledge of the effects in their real causes, of the “facts” in the powers of which they are the manifestations, which is the equivalent of the *identification with the causes* in the terms of a “magical” state. Only such a state can lead to the absolute rationale of a phenomenon; only this state can “explain” it in an eminent sense, because in it that phenomenon is grasped, or even *seen*, in its real genesis.

The important consequence of this is that on the initiatic path the acquisition of knowledge parallels the acquisition of power, since the active identification with a cause of virtually confers a power over that same cause. (10) Modern men believe that this is the same in the case of their science, since through various techniques science brings about well-known material realizations; and yet they grossly mistaken, since the power afforded by technology is no more a true power than the explanations of profane sciences are true explanations. The cause, in both cases, is the same; it is the fact of a man who remains a man, and who does not change his nature to any significant degree. This is why the possibilities afforded by technology have a “democratic” and even *immoral* character, like its corresponding knowledge: differences between individuals mean nothing to them. It is a power consisting of automatism, which belongs to everyone and to no one; a power that is not a *value*, nor *justice*, which can make a person powerful without making him superior at the same time.

However, this is possible only because, in the world of technology, one does not and cannot speak of a true *act*, namely an action that begins directly from the Self and affirms itself in the order of real causes. Being absolutely mechanical and inorganic, hence lacking relations with the essence of the Self, the world of technology represents the antithesis of anything that may have the character of real power, created out of superiority, or stamped with superiority, incommunicable, inalienable, spiritual. We must acknowledge that many man today, for all his knowledge of phenomena and through surrounded by his countless diabolical machines, is as miserable and lost as ever; spiritually, he is a worse barbarian than those whom he presumed to call by this name; he is increasingly conditioned rather than conditioning, and thus he is exposed to reactions in an interplay of irrational forces that ephemeralize the mirage of his exclusively material power and things. He is farther away from the path of self-realization than man was in any other civilization, because a surrogate of knowledge and power that one may well call diabolical replaces authentic knowledge and power in him.

In the initiatic domain, we repeat, authentic knowledge is justice, sanction of a dignity, natural and inalienable, emanation of an integrated life, according to the well-defined degrees of such an integration. Just as in this order of things knowledge achieved beyond the uncertainty and ambiguity of sensible phenomena does not refer to formulae or to abstract explicative principles, but rather to real beings grasped through immediate spiritual perception----likewise, the ideal of power here is that of an action occurring not subject to natural laws, but above them; not among phenomena, but among the causes of phenomena, with the irresistibility and the right proper to him who is superior. And this superiority comes from having effectively disengaged himself from the human condition, and from having achieved the initiatic awakening.